

ETHICS AT THE AIRPORT BORDER: FLOWING, DWELLING, ATOMISING

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Abstract

This article contributes to the burgeoning literature on airports, addressing a current gap between literature that focuses on the cosmopolitical experience of the airport and that which focuses on the potentially dehumanising impacts of a technologized, securitised border by investigating the ethos of the space. We do not present an account of how the airport ought to work; rather, we consider what ethical relations and subjectivities are constructed, encouraged and made (im)possible in the airport space. We argue that the airport border assembles a variety of commercial, security and spatial technologies in areas of both 'flow' and 'dwell' which generate and privilege a particular type of ethical subject – the temporarily suspended, atomised individual. We begin with an understanding of space as produced through plurality and movement, and analyse how atomisation is produced and sustained before reflecting on the potentially dangerous implications of such processes.

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‘The terminal at each end is full of categories of inspection to which we must submit, impelling us toward a sense of inwardness, a sense of smallness, a self-exposure we are never prepared for no matter how often we take a journey... The process removes us from the world and sets us apart from each other.’

Don DeLillo (1987: 253-4)

The airport border is a profoundly ethical space, filled with values, purposes, trajectories and ways of being, which may, or may not, come into meaningful contact. While it appears a merely functional space, such functionality hides an array of ethical and political choices and divisions. Airport spaces thus proclaim their cosmopolitan possibilities to the world, using taglines such as ‘Where the world connects’ (Dubai International Airport), ‘Connecting Flights. Connecting People’ (Salt Lake City International Airport) and ‘Meet the World’ (Frankfurt Airport). Such marketing slogans may appear trivial but we propose to take them seriously, following the lead of recent ‘mobilities’ literature (see Elliott and Radford, 2015). After all, unlike ports and land boundaries, airports materialise the constructed nature of nation-state borders; they form ‘a national frontier on the outskirts of a major city in the middle of a country; that in itself should suggest the beginning of a different spatial dimension.’ (Pascoe, 2001: 34) Despite this, the ethics of airport border spaces – the relations of responsibility and sociality they allow, promote or constrain – have been under-examined in the burgeoning literature on airports. Rather, the focus has more commonly been on the political implications of transformations in security and surveillance technology, or on the possibilities for individual experimentation, expression and fulfilment found in the terminal departures lounge.

This paper offers a foray into filling this gap. We shall not be applying a theory of ethics, an analysis of the way the airport border *ought* to work based on an abstract construction and subsequent application of a conception of justice or rights. Rather, we explore the *ethos* of the space, understood as the way of being or dwelling in relation to others which it produces or promotes (Derrida, 2001). Through participant observation of three European airports, supplemented by guided walks and interviews with European airport managers and immigration and customs officials, we explore the types of subject the airport border space produces and the ways of relating/responding it permits and discourages. Our analysis is restricted to European airport border spaces and cannot easily be generalised beyond this context. Developing an observation made by Rosler (1994: 68-9) in an American context, we argue that the European airport border assembles a variety of commercial, security and spatial technologies which generate and privilege a particular type of ethical subject – the temporarily suspended, atomised

individual. While this is certainly not the *only* subject created by the airport border assemblage, and neither is it impossible to resist (Lisle, 2003), it is the most rewarded and has the most pervasive ethical significance. Though such atomisation can offer enticing experiences, it is potentially dangerous: the suspension of social ties that atomisation entails means that the airport border space reduces conditions for responsiveness and solidarity, the very grounds of ethics.

The article begins by outlining our approach to relational ethics, describing how it meshes with an understanding of space as produced through plurality and movement. The second section introduces the methods we used to investigate three European airport border spaces, before the third focuses on our analysis, outlining the ways in which atomisation is produced and sustained. The concluding section briefly suggests how the space might be imagined and practiced otherwise. While its atomisation is scripted, this does not relieve individuals from their own responsibility for creating the airport border.

ETHICS, SPACE AND ATOMISATION

What we mean by the atomisation of the airport border space, and its concerning ethical effects, can best be illustrated with an example from our observation of one particular case before we delve into its theoretical underpinnings. Behind the electronic gates (e-gates) which formed the barrier between security screening and the departures lounge in one European airport,¹ a group of six or seven officers selectively stopped travellers as they passed through.² This continued for about an hour and, as we watched from a nearby café, it became clear that every individual who bore the visible markers of Muslim religion or Arab descent (skin colour and head scarves) was stopped (see Fig. 1). No white travellers were approached. Those detained had their passports and travel documents taken; they were told to remain where they had been stopped – separated from their fellow detainees by at least two metres – while their documents were checked against various print-outs and laptops at a temporary computer station set up to the side. Notably, no resistance was offered by any of the individuals involved, beyond a look of shock, sadness or concern; there was no argument, and no refusal. Indeed, most of the encounters were quite good natured (at least on the part of the authorities) and several checks ended with a laugh or the provision of onward directions.

¹ Airport C - see footnote 5 regarding anonymization below.

² It was not clear to us, observing from a nearby coffee shop, what kind of officers these were (immigration, security, customs) as we could not see or read their insignia.



FIG. 1

This is hardly the most egregious event to take place in a European airport,³ but what was particularly telling was the lack of response from other travellers. No one stopped to watch; no one spoke with those who had been stopped or the officials. Certainly no one interfered or made it their business. These clear acts of profiling and exceptional additional checks, which was perhaps based on specific intelligence, were easily incorporated into what was ‘normal’ in this space. They were only of concern to the individuals who had been stopped. Furthermore, by having those detained remain where they were, separated from each other by even a couple of metres, the authorities made use of the pliability of subjects who had just passed through security screening (Bennett, 2008: 68). These individuals did not speak to or make eye-contact with each other; their common experience of racial profiling failed to forge any form of connection or solidarity. Each looked only towards the authority figures and their temporary computer station – the gentleman in the foreground of Fig. 1 is looking in this direction as he waits, while behind

³ Most recently, in July 2017 a gate attendant at Nice airport made headlines by punching a passenger who was holding a baby (Haag, 2017).

him another family has been approached. The ease with which any ethical ties of solidarity, obligation or mutuality were voided was both marked and troubling.

Our concern in this article is to ask how the European airport border is constructed as an ethical, relational space such that this situation becomes possible. How does the material infrastructure, interaction with technology and regulation of movement operate to produce a certain kind of ethical subject – what we call the temporarily atomised individual? Studies of the airport border have generated a wealth of literature in recent years as the space and its mobilities have come to be recognised as requiring trans- or post-disciplinary exploration (Cwerner, 2009: 9). It has been examined as a political (Salter, 2008) and commercial (Rowley and Slack, 1999) space, a zone of surveillance (Adey, 2004; Lyon, 2008), mobilities (Cwerner et al., 2009; Fuller and Harley, 2005), cultural experimentation (Elliot and Radford, 2015), and security practices (Adey, 2009; Amoore, 2006; Amoore and Hall, 2009). Yet none of this literature has directly tackled or questioned the ethics of this space. Nonetheless, an implicit divide often appears between those who see it as primarily enabling and those who emphasise its constraints. For much of the mobilities literature, modern airports are becoming spaces of ‘infinite experimentation’ where the commercial, culinary, and entertainment opportunities open to the passenger enables a whole range of different ‘mobile lives’ (Elliott and Radford, 2015: 1065-7). Not only are airports advantageous to the individualising subject, they are also new spaces of ‘meetingness’ (Urry, 2009: 28), or ‘neighbourliness’ (Serres, 1995: 258), with new networking opportunities enabling the development of cosmopolitan identities (Lassen, 2009: 178). By contrast, the literature which focuses on surveillance and security technology at the airport border is much less sanguine. What often emerges is an implicit argument that the space’s securitising practices effectively *reduce* the human subject to some kind of object, animal or text. People are ‘reconfigured as information’ (Lyon, 2008: 35), ‘reduced... [to] objects of danger or benefit’ (Salter, 2007: 59). They are scanned like bar-codes (Adey, 2004: 1377), animalised (Adey, 2009: 275), rendered ‘a transparency’ (Amoore and Hall, 2009: 452). Here, an underlying uneasiness circles around the dehumanising practices of the airport border space which fails to adequately respect subjectivity.

This kind of ethical critique is easily countered by those who guard the border and operate via a legal discourse of ethics as justice, what Walker calls a ‘*theoretical-juridical model* of morality’ (2007: 7). Adriano Silvestri of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) noted that safeguards exist in EU law to protect the human rights of anyone crossing an internal or external

European border, effectively preventing their dehumanisation.⁴ However, the recourse to rights as remedy underlines our argument in this paper: the ethical subject produced and favoured by the airport border is neither object nor animal, but a temporarily suspended, socially atomised individual, a subjectification for which rights are inadequate as a remedy in practice. First, rights adhere to individuals, and their enactment is in isolation; they do not require any form of relationality or connection with fellow travellers, where they don't actively discourage it. Such a vision of ethics is individualist, impersonal and 'socially modular' (Walker, 2007: 9). Second, we saw very little evidence of attendance to human rights concerns in the airports we studied, beyond one sign in two of the three airports. Both were clearly placed in spaces of 'flow', where as one airport manager put it, you are encouraged to pick up information 'on the way, not in the way.' As such, the detailed information and small print encouraged the subject to flow past, rather than stop and block the space, limiting both the awareness and the use of the rights discourse itself for the majority of individuals.

Traditionally, ethics is understood in theoretical-juridical terms, similar to that of the FRA: as an area of philosophy concerned with right and wrong, good and bad, seeking to make judgements on what one *ought* to do in a given situation (Singer, 1991: v). In this sense, the ethics of a space could be understood as exploring how it ought to be better organised to promote goods such as social justice, human rights and equality whilst limiting exclusion and violence (see Proctor and Smith, 1999; Smith, 2000). This approach to moral geographies often operates by judging actual or lived spatial practices and divisions according to how well they reflect an abstractly conceived ideal of justice or rights. There is, however, an alternative way of conceiving of ethics, long advocated by feminist scholars. As Gilligan (1982: 104-5) famously put it, we can also speak of ethics in a 'different voice' – a voice of care rather than a voice of justice. While a voice of justice is ultimately a language of rights, individualism and isolation, the voice of care is one of relationships with and responsibilities for others. This focus draws feminist approaches into the same orbit as the poststructuralist insights of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida for whom ethics is always about ways of relating/responding to difference (Barnett 2005). Though dissimilar in key respects, poststructuralist and feminist approaches start from a conception of human beings as 'irreducibly relational' and conceive this as the basis for critical reflection on everyday spatial practices and institutions, particularly focusing upon how they enable or constrict relationality (Groenhout, 2004: 82).

⁴ In an interview with one of our project co-investigators, 23 May 2016.

What these approaches do not always do, however, is take account of the way space can be used to deny, cover over, or reveal these ties of implication and beholdenness. Space is not an inert given, a static backdrop within which subjects are formed and against which interactions occur. Rather, just as the subject is generated by social relationships, Massey (2005: 9) argues that space is also the ‘product of interrelations’, an arena of ‘coexisting heterogeneity’ created by the crossing of different trajectories and plural ways of being and becoming. In this sense, ethics is necessarily spatial and space is necessarily ethical – both are constituted in, by and through relations. Massey (2004) used this relational conception to critically interrogate the ‘geographies of responsibility’ incurred in spaces such as modern post-industrial cities. Space, and how it is organised, both allows and disallows certain subjects while also shaping their interactions.

An exploration of spatial ethics, then, is not about proposing an ideal form of sociality in which correct ties of responsibility, solidarity and care are fully or finally determined. Rather, it is about ‘mapping the structure of standing assumptions that guide the distribution of responsibilities – how they are assigned, negotiated, deflected – in particular forms of moral life’ (Walker, 2007: 105). Such a mapping concentrates on the social production of its subjects, how their connections are enabled or disabled, encouraged or discouraged, and to what ends. This is particularly difficult in apparently functional and exceptionally securitised spaces, which we assume have little ethical character. The urgency of such an exploration, however, comes in the fact that such ‘functionality’ and exceptionality naturalises a *particular* production of subjectivity and the mapping of its responsibilities. The airport border’s functionality hides its ‘non-naturalness’, the fact that it is produced via ethical and political *choices* that work for some and against others. While not proposing an ideal structure of such responsibilities, we do not entirely resist normativity. Our study is motivated by the assumption that responsiveness, collaboration and care are things that are to be cultivated, whilst never evading critical reflection. This is what Connolly (1995: xxiii-xxiv) calls an ‘ethos of critical responsiveness’ that ‘cultivates responsiveness to difference in ways that disturb traditional virtues of community and the normal individual. It does not present *itself* as the single universal to which other ethical traditions must bow. Rather, it provides a prod and counterpoint to them’.

Processes of atomisation are troubling precisely because they undermine the fundamental relationality and responsiveness of being that makes ethics part and parcel of our everyday lives. The concept was perhaps most clearly introduced by Arendt in her investigation into the origins of totalitarianism. In this context, the atomised subject is the completely isolated and lonely

individual, characterised by the absence of traditional ties of family, friendship or class (1986: 323-4), to which we might add others such as race, age, gender, (dis)ability or common experience. It is thus a kind of 'extreme individualization' in which the subject recognises no 'social links or obligations' (Arendt, 1986: 317). In Walker's terms, atomisation maps responsibility such that is always 'deflected', degrading the subject's responsiveness entirely when pushed to the extreme. For Arendt, this process goes hand-in-hand with massification in a totalitarian society, where the breaking down of class structures and hierarchies leads to the inability of the subject to recognise themselves as part of any greater meaningful totality than a 'mass of individuals' without common interests (Arendt, 1986: 315). What is lost is any ability to act in the world in concert with others; this gives way to a normalised conformism and passive behaviour (Breen, 2012: 101). What is produced is thus a 'nobody... deprived of the means of any human solidarity' (Isaac, 1992: 54). The specific problem of atomisation is not, therefore, that it restricts certain people's rights or treats them unequally (though it may well do, and this would *also* be a problem). It is that it restricts the grounds of morality *as such* – the sociality of a space, the responsiveness of subjects that is the very *stuff* of ethics.

To be clear, we are *not* arguing that the airport border is a totalitarian space, nor that its atomisation is ever complete. However, as we outline below, what we find is that the airport produces and encourages a temporarily atomised subject, whose responsiveness is disabled, who is discouraged from unprompted, spontaneous interaction with the dense mass of humanity with which it is forced to coexist in a constrained manner. Martha Rosler has argued that it is the drive for technical efficiency which defines the airport, over and above interests of state or the public, and 'has resulted in structures whose experiencing subjects are atomised' (1994: 68-9). It is clear that the processes of atomisation prompted by airport border spaces are neither totalising nor ever totally successful. Many of these processes are in fact relatively easily resisted (others much less so), but any totalising claims to atomisation fails to account for the 'possibility of multiple and resistant subject positions' at the airport border (Lisle, 2003: 25). Nonetheless, a more temporary and limited atomisation is, we argue, the overriding ethical effect of these practices.

MAPPING AND OBSERVING THE AIRPORT BORDER

In order to access the myriad ways airport border spaces produce subjects by structuring movement, behaviour and interaction, our investigation combined participant observation by two researchers of three European airports – which we shall refer to as A, B and C – and semi-structured interviews and guided walks with airport managers, airport immigration, and customs agents as part of a wider project.⁵ These sites were selected because all three are the main airports for their capital cities and therefore broadly comparable, though this inevitably restricts the generalisability of our findings. Not only would the norms and spaces of non-European airports potentially offer greater sociality and responsiveness (for a Ghanaian example, see Chalfin, 2008), minor local European airports may do likewise, especially if they facilitate specifically shared migrant routes (Burrell, 2011). Whilst two of our sites are significant hubs, one is smaller and therefore provided a greater point of contrast.

Adey (2006: 81) suggests that the airport can be viewed via a time-lapse exposure. This vivid image of transient paths, mobilities, encounters, and interactions points towards their overlapping and lasting impacts on the space itself, shaping how it comes into being as an ethical and political space. The mobilities of the airport are uneven across its different zones, however. As one airport manager noted, the wider space can be divided into areas of ‘flow’ and areas of ‘dwell’. The intention is to contain different forms of ‘dwelling’ in the departures lounge and boarding gates where greater freedom of movement and (notably consumerist) behaviour is offered; other areas are meant to be ‘all about flow’, and interactions are much more explicitly constrained. We have therefore divided the spaces that make up the airport border into those of flowing and those of dwelling, recognising that this organisation is always disrupted, both deliberately and also by inefficiencies, technological failure, and passengers’ own behaviour.

Our observations comprised three layers. First, we carried out a material mapping of the built space. The exercise of mapping aims at understanding the everyday production of space (Ranade, 2007), concentrating on those intended for flowing and different forms of dwelling. The central aim of material mapping is the practice of locational inventory, physically detailing the built infrastructure, technology and material elements of the space, including airline and customer service desks, seating, signage, barriers, e-gates, scanners, and so on. These maps also noted the characteristics of the inventory such as function, permanence and mobility. We therefore asked whether the materiality of the space, its placement and design, appeared to be intended to bring

⁵ We were requested not to reveal the airport at which these immigration and customs officials operated; we have anonymised the airports themselves to avoid giving clues to their identities.

people together or separate them; whether it prompted ‘togetherness’ and responsiveness or constrained it; and how its purpose could be altered or resisted.

The second layer of data was that of mobility mapping – tracking the way that people move through a space, occupy and use it. This gave us some access to the interaction between the corporeality of subjects and the materiality of the airport border (see Salter, 2006; Adey, 2008b: 147). Following Massey’s (2005) argument that space is the material, affective and embodied *product of* movements and interactions, this mobility mapping allows us to see the character of particular areas within the wider space: how open they are to different subjectivities, their movements and responsiveness, how they form those subjectivities and how, in turn, they are formed by different ways of flowing and dwelling. We therefore employed variations of two techniques: bench studies, which track people from one particular space over time; and seating sweeps, which assess how people distribute themselves within a space (Given and Leckie, 2003). These allowed us to track the trajectories and interactions between subjects and their material environment from two different perspectives, paying particular attention to different forms of movement and stasis, individuals and groups, as well as race, age, gender and (dis)ability.

A final layer of data was added through embedded observation. As researchers, we were situated as passengers throughout this part of the study, and, with one glaring exception,⁶ other individuals within the airport border space were not aware they were being observed. This allowed us to access the operation of certain behavioural constraints, including what Cromley refers to as coupling constraints – where, when and for how long a person has to join with others – and authority constraints – where the priorities of a particular individual or group for the use of a space is enforced (Cromley, 1999: 68). During our observation we particularly sought patterns of ‘normal’ or ‘dominant’ behaviour in each space and how it was shaped by the material environment and interaction with technology. We also looked for ‘out-of-place’ behaviour and the responses it engendered, without deliberately prompting this ourselves. Throughout the observation, two researchers were present and took detailed field notes which reflected both what was observed as well as our intuitions and reactions. Due to the limits of our time in each space, the focus of our observation was on passengers and travellers; staff of the airport were considered in terms of reaction to and interaction with travellers. Following the observation, the researchers compared their notes in order to identify similarities and differences

⁶ While conducting the material mapping at the check-in hall of airport B, one researcher was approached and questioned by policemen, at one stage being surrounded by seven uniformed and heavily armed officers.

and reflect on their meaning in three areas: between the researchers' findings themselves, between the spaces of flowing and dwelling and between the different airports.

SCRIPTING MOBILITY: FLOWING, DWELLING, ATOMISING

Throughout our research we found that no firm distinctions can be made between areas of 'flow' and 'dwell', despite attempts to maintain the division. As Fuller (2009: 72) notes, the space as a whole is perhaps better characterised as a series of 'jerks', interlacing movement and its suspension. The dwelling of the airport border can thus be seen as an interrupted mobility, the flowing as ways of 'dwelling-in-transit' (Urry, 2009: 32). It is partly this constant interruption of activity, the incessant need to wait for and attend to the next form of movement as a queue moves or a flight is announced, that disables social responsiveness and favours a form of isolation. Nonetheless, there is a difference between the *types* of movement which dominate and are encouraged in different zones of the airport. We found that behaviour was effectively being 'scripted' in each area, and the particular script a traveller followed (or resisted) depended largely upon where they were at any time. Relying on the work of clinical psychologists (Langer and Abelson, 1972), Alvesson and Spicer argue that social behaviour often involves little thought or reflection but follows pre-programmed patterns or 'scripts' that allows us to mindlessly navigate complex situations. Effectively, 'Scripts do the thinking, people rehearse them' (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016: 58-61). These scripts are particularly strong at the airport border, a space in which we collude with the imposed authority constraints because 'we learn soon enough that when we cooperate with the machine, it works better' (Fuller, 2009: 66). As Bissell noted with his study of train passengers, the affective atmosphere created by a particular space does not require conscious emulation of others' behaviour, it simply 'primes' people to 'act in a particular way' (2010: 274).

Areas of 'flow' therefore offer one type of priming script; these are intended to usher the movement of travellers as a 'mass' through the airport border, constituting journeys from point A to point B via specific traversal areas of the terminal with minimal interaction. The check-in area, corridors between halls, queues, and the technology-heavy screening areas of security, passport control and customs that constitute the 'bordering' functions of the space are characteristic of these areas. 'Dwell' points embed a different type of scripted motion. Here, movement tends to be circular within the space and is oriented around central nodal points:

banks of seating, shops, Flight Information Displays (FIDs), restaurants and cafes, viewing areas and the baggage carousel. These areas include the departures hall, departures gates and baggage halls. While these areas produce a variety of different types of subject – the deviant dweller in a space of flow, the bored people watcher, the shopper, the excited tourist, the oblivious novel reader, the transient office-worker – the scripts in all areas are united in separating their subjects from one another. Indeed, by embedding these scripts within the material infrastructure and technology of the airport, the ideal seems to be a form of behaviour that requires almost no inter-human responsiveness whatsoever.

Flowing

While the dwell zones were quite different across the airports, areas of flow were remarkably similar. All three check-in areas were large, rectangular hangars with minimal seating along one wall dominated by airline information desks and currency exchanges. FIDs providing guidance as to the location of check-in, electronic check-in machines, numbered check-in desks and queue mazes populated the centre of the room. Passengers were then directed by clear signing toward a narrower entrance to the security screening area where they queue through electronic boarding-card checks. In a much narrower area or ‘pinch point’, passengers are forced to slow their pace as they pass a set of signs, desks, and bins, informing them of what they must do to get through security (remove belts, laptops, etc.) and to relieve themselves of subversive material (liquids, flammable material, sharp objects, etc.). The goal of this area, as one airport manager noted, is that of maximising ‘flow rate’; its intention is to ‘get people ready for what they are about to receive’. Passengers then entered a queue maze, often as directed by a member of staff, before stacking their luggage and jackets in trays on a conveyor belt and passing through metal detectors and back-scatter x-rays. They are then reunited with their bags, possibly after an inspection. While airport A offered a substantial area with seating for people to reassemble themselves and wait for other members of their travelling party, airport B provided only a narrow gangway which directed people onwards to the dwelling of departures. In contrast, airport C funnelled travellers onwards without clear signs into another pinch point using movable barriers. This opened out into queues for passport control (e-gates and manned booths) *before* allowing entry into the departures lounge – the site of racially profiled additional checks noted above.

Each airport had a slightly different approach to communicating information and behaviour scripts to travellers, but all used a combination of written and graphic signs, with large arrows and bold colour schemes to direct traffic. Corridors were generally narrow enough to encourage

a particular direction of traffic; moving walkways similarly asserted both the direction of travel and the side of the corridor to be used. Frosted glass or a lack of windows discouraged lingering. While some minimal seating was provided in certain corridors (especially airport A and C), this never appeared to be in use. In places, such as intersections or more open areas where confusion was likely, the material environment was supplemented by employees who, often silently, pointed the way or indicated which line to join. This was also common when there were large numbers of people, such as at passport control at the ‘actual’ sovereign border. This space was open and dominated by queue mazes to e-gates and manned booths in airports A and B, whilst it was a narrow corridor with two desks (EU and non-EU) in airport C. Even here, interaction is curtailed; seemingly bored immigration officials waved people through after a cursory glance at their passports, and e-gates operated to nullify the need for any contact at all.

Cromley (1999: 68) argues that the amount of time spent at particular locations is ruled by ‘coupling constraints’, which define where, when, and for how long a person joins with others. In the functional space of flow, dominated by the goal of efficiency, this time is kept short. Even stopping and waiting for someone is difficult as it blocks the flow of those behind; response is restricted to audible ‘tutting’ and exaggerated movements of avoidance, reinforcing the script of onward movement. The airport is designed to facilitate this smooth progress in such a way that only minimal contact between individuals – particularly strangers – is necessary. The script of efficient ‘flow’ is embedded within the infrastructure itself. Throughout all spaces of flow, travel was concertedly in one direction – guided clearly by marks on the floor, signs indicating location and direction of gates, and contained by one-way gates and doors separating different parts of the terminal. In airport B, fish-eye cameras in check-in halls, which seem to be security devices to the casual observer, actually monitored the flow of people and, through algorithmic processing, alerted the airport management when a new check-in desk or security line needed to be opened.

Mobility mapping clearly indicated the effectiveness of these measures. The movement of people through spaces of flow was direct, and often without hesitation. The expectation of physical indicators such as queue mazes is so strong that when they weren’t set up in the entrance to security at airport A – possibly because of low numbers of travellers at the time – confusion abounded and people struggled to choose which line to join, as everyone tried to guess which was shortest. Two areas prompted particularly strong coupling constraints which emphasised the atomising effects of the airport border’s scripts: check-in and security screening. At check-in, the

queue mazes often move at glacial speed and can be very long, whilst a minimum of open space crushes people together with their baggage and trolleys. Though forced together, we observed no inter-group contact. At airport C, where check-in was more chaotic, and airport B, where large groups of school-children were checking in, there was a great deal of loud conversation, but all appeared to be intra-group. Once inside the queue mazes, behaviour became less rowdy, conversation dropped as people could stand at most two side-by-side, temporarily breaking existing ties. Eyes drifted forward and glazed over as, adapting Giovanni Gasparini (1995: 35), an ‘unequipped waiting’ without pre-planned distraction and substituted meaning took hold. Complaints about this dead-time were limited to those travelling together and were not shared with strangers despite their common experience of boredom and frustration. More commonly, silence gradually descended.

At the security screening, groups were broken down even further against particularly strong authority constraints. Most obviously, this is enabled by the provision of ‘fast-track’ security for those willing to pay, introducing a rudimentary class divide into the process. Beyond this, more isolating practices occur. The security preparation areas, even when larger as in airport B, remain a space of flow and discourage waiting; those requiring more time to separate their liquids and dump contraband can be left behind. Passengers were then directed individually, or in small groups, into different queue mazes and placed in single-file. The need to prepare one’s body, baggage, and clothing, all under the watchful eye of security personnel, militates against conversation with those in front and behind, even if they are known. While we observed a certain anxious energy in this area, this was not the anxiety one would necessarily expect in a securitized confessional complex where the individual is at their most vulnerable to identity checks and threat identification (Salter, 2007). Rather, we interpreted it as an anxiety associated with a desire to demonstrate individual competence, a knowledge of and compliance with the security script in order to avoid looking foolish or inexperienced. Despite the tight space and overwhelming surveillance, contact with others undergoing the same procedures is neither impossible nor explicitly discouraged; the authority constraint is that, if you are distracted by conversation or helping someone else disassemble, you might overlook your preparation or move too slowly and prove yourself incapable of following the script. In blocking the flow, the incompetent traveller attracts an isolating response from passengers and security personnel – not suspicion, but a mixture of pity and irritation.

This atomising script is profoundly functional; Adey notes that ‘airports need passengers to be compliant in order to process them as quickly as possible’ (Adey, 2008a: 445). This is aided by the process of singling passengers out for additional screening, whether randomly or as a result of the scanning process. It has been argued that security technology such as the back-scatter x-ray takes the process of individuation one step further, literally breaking the individual up into their constituent biometric elements (Amoore and Hall, 2009). It is experienced, however, as a disciplining atomisation best avoided. One of us was singled out after the back-scatter x-ray in airports B and C, and subjected to the ‘spectacle’ of the frisk (Wood, 2003: 337) in full view of other passengers. Taken out of the queue, the researcher was placed in a separate area, cordoned off from another questionable individual by a line on the floor, before being called for more fulsome inspection. While polite and non-invasive, this was felt as a singularising judgement on one’s ability to properly negotiate the airport border space.

Crucially, the atomising stress on flow is organised around a particular type of passenger and breaks the ties that might lead to forms of mutual assistance, care and response. In the architecture and design of airport infrastructure, a set of simplified and imagined passengers are constructed who have particular affective potentialities (Adey, 2008a: 442). Cresswell (2006: 238) discusses the ‘PAX’ – the abstracted passenger, ‘a generalisation of what real passengers look like, think, or feel’ (Adey 2008a 442). Ranade (2007: 1520) notes that in planning public spaces, architects assumes a ‘neutral’ user – who, in general, is a white, heterosexual (and able bodied) man. This neutral user was reflected throughout the airport infrastructure. Signs at the airports we studied were generally in one language, at a particular height; little evidence of brail, or assistance for the sight or hearing-impaired was evident. Similarly, the scripted behaviour and demonstration of competence privileges the ‘neutral’ subject. Accessing the security bins and filling them with necessary speed presumes an able-bodied, possibly young, subject. Wheelchair users are separately rolled up to security, a singularising spectacle for those waiting in line. Those who struggle must rely upon airport employees as helping other passengers distracts from the scripted flow where it is not explicitly discouraged. Passing through security at airport C we observed one elderly gentleman struggling to understand what to do with his camera at the security line: people flowed around him, jumping his space in the queue, or chose a different line to avoid the hold-up. No one offered to explain the process.

Dwelling

Studies that have noted the broken sociality of the airport have often focused upon it as a space of flows and concentrated less on its dwell points (see Relph, 1976; Rosler, 1994; Augé, 1995; Gottdeiner, 2001). In contrast, the mobilities literature, which emphasises the sociality and freedom of the terminal space, has often focused on departures lounges (see Cwerner et al., 2009; Elliott and Radford, 2015). However, just as spaces of flow and dwell cannot be firmly separated, so the atomising effects of security screening do not immediately switch-off after their scripts have been performed. Subjects who have been individuated and primed to deflect responsibilities are unlikely to immediately become socially responsive. We concentrated our observation of dwelling in the departures lounges of the three airports which, though much more diverse than the areas of flow, also maintained a set of (looser) priming scripts which constrained and enabled the behaviour of passengers.⁷ These atomising scripts of dwelling were not literally written into the walls and floor of the terminal, operating in more subtle ways.

The material maps of each airport's dwell areas revealed substantial differences and key similarities. Airport A resembled an old-fashioned arcade, with shops and restaurants on either side of a long corridor which wound its way through to a small central hub. Here, a second floor included two further restaurants and a smoking garden. In contrast, Airport B was a vast rectangular hangar, spread across two floors, the upper of which was dominated by restaurants and was cut away, enabling views of the lower floor where gates, seating, shops and cafes were located (see Fig. 3), looking out on the apron and runway. Class stratification was overwhelmingly apparent in the materiality of airport B. On the shorter sides of the hangar, a restricted third floor could be glimpsed where the first-class lounges were located, offering panoramic views over the less fortunate. The majority of shopping, located on the lower floor, was divided between the budget chain pub, high-street clothes shops and pharmacists to one end; designer outlets, high-end jewellery stores and a champagne bar were located at the other. Such a stark reinforcement of class hierarchy and identification demonstrated the distance between the airport's processes of atomisation and those of Arendt's totalitarian society.

Airport C was organised around a set of numbered lounges which you could walk between through long 'boulevards' with moving walkways. Within the lounges and set off to the side of the walkways were a range of different styles and types of seating and spaces, including a casino, a children's play area and science museum, a smoking pod/lounge, mediation/prayer room, cafes, bars and restaurants to suit all tastes and (well-padded) wallets and a screened disabled

⁷ In contrast, the departures gates and baggage retrieval areas replicated the 'unequipped waiting' of the areas of flow, with people queueing at the gate long before boarding had actually been announced.

seating area. It was in airport C then that we could see clearest evidence in the material design for the ‘freeing’ claims of mobilities literature. Rather than producing solitude ‘experienced as an overburdening or emptying of individuality’ (Augé, 1995: 87), it offered spaces of largely individualised experimentation. Travellers appeared more able to try on new identities, experiences and ways of being, even if this did not generate responsiveness to others (Elliott and Radford, 2015: 1067).

This seems to imply an *absence* of scripts in airport spaces that make possible a whole range of different ‘mobile lives’, including the facilitation and encouragement of social networks and maintenance of relationships (Elliott and Radford, 2015: 1065). Such a ‘dwelling-in-transit’ is based in ‘interconnectedness’ in ‘novel global meeting places’ (Urry, 2009: 32-5). While an attendant eye is always given in mobilities literature to the social unevenness and inequality of such opportunities, they nonetheless offer the possibility of building a cosmopolitan global identity (Elliott and Urry, 2010) by facilitating multicultural encounters (Urry, 2007). Yet, it is notable that the mobilities literature rarely mentions specific ‘person-to-person’ contact taking place at the airport border; rather, the emphasis is on sharing experiences with *pre-existing* contacts (family and friends) during travel via social media (Elliott and Radford, 2015: 1074), or making new contacts in the destination (Kesselring, 2009: 43).

Our mobility mapping suggests that dwelling spaces maintained scripts which regulated circulation and atomised behaviour around two fixed points: FIDs and available seating. Many different patterns of (im)mobility were replicated across the three airports. Some people got stuck in the duty-free ‘loops’, some headed straight for the ‘normal’ shops, or the bars, cafes and restaurants. Some went immediately to the free seating, dipping their heads into a book, a laptop or attempting sleep. Others, particularly in the ‘arcade’ of airport A, meandered between the various concessions without an identifiable goal. Airport B, with its class stratification, appeared to prompt more purposeful and direct motion. Tracking people’s movements over time (bench studies) however, revealed that one stationary space they always returned to (or sat in front of to begin with) was the FIDs. The need to keep up to date with the (deliberately) slow release of information regarding delays, gate announcements, gate changes and so on meant that movement was effectively ‘tethered’ (Adey, 2007: 528). Our conclusions thus align with those of Adey whose interviews with airport architects suggests that this ‘holding’ function is a deliberate strategy to do two things: ensure operational efficiency by not allowing passengers to wander off and miss their flights; and keep passengers close to shops and cafes so they are more likely to

spend their money (528-9). This was particularly notable at airport B where the larger FIDs were stationed in the open corridor *between* the eating area and shops, prompting regular gatherings of people staring up at the screens before moving off.

Despite the common experience of frustration, boredom and suspension, we observed very little responsiveness between individuals and groups at the FIDs. Attention was directed upwards, away from each other, as passengers searched for their individual flights. Each experienced the same problem, but individually. Likewise, in the seating areas and cafes, the most popular seats were those facing the FIDs. Not only did the slow release of information interrupt and tether mobility, it constrained interaction – conversation and eye-contact were incessantly broken in order to check the latest flight update, or to listen to the latest flight announcement. Moreover, any communication ended unpredictably as one person or the other rushed off to the gate. Sustained interaction was tenuous at best, its durability governed by a flashing FID. Technology is thus used to create or at least encourage isolated, separated and atomised observers (Crary, 1999). Even side by side, close together in front of FIDs, our study confirmed Adey's (2007) findings that 'spectatorship' often produces a form of inaccessibility.⁸ The FIDs did not *prevent* inter-personal response, but successfully discouraged it through scripted behaviour privileging efficiency and consumerism.

The second frequent 'tether' of circulation and mobility we observed was that of available seating. While some travellers would find one seat and stay there until their gate was called, more common was a movement around the lounge (taking in the commercial concessions, toilets, and other features) and returning to different seating areas (from the general to that of bars and cafes). The need for seating is aided by having recently negotiated the trial of flow zones (check-in and security) and the inability to bring drinks into the dwell area. Airport A offered two standard general seating types: standard metal benches and brightly coloured, stadium/ellipse-shaped couches with a central barrier (see Fig. 2). Outside eating and drinking establishments, all were static and immovable. Airport C presented the greatest variety of seating in the various zones of its lounges and boulevards, from winding padded sofas to hard, wooden 'bleacher-style' benches, individual corrals with a table, chair and powerpoint, and even stand-alone, comfortable loungers. All except the latter were immovable. Airport B was far more uniform. Here, the general seating in the middle of the lounge's lower floor consisted of immovable banks of conjoined seats, placed back to back and facing each other (see Fig. 3). Individual seats were

⁸ Adey notes a range of 'spectating' effects, from large windows onto the apron/runway, to TV screens in bars and cafes, which, with muted sound nonetheless draw people's attention away from their fellow travellers.

separated by arm-rests and placed in uncomfortably close proximity to those they were facing, such that stretching out one's legs would block the passage. More variable seating was provided in cafes and bars, but was limited to paying customers. In the café shown in Figure 3 (caught in the bottom of the frame), the most popular seats were those placed adjacent and perpendicular to the general seating, allowing easy view of the FID and the seated public.



FIG. 2



FIG. 3

Despite the variability of this seating, uniting its form were the different methods of separating and isolating people. This was most obviously performed by immovable armrests (the uncomfortable bleachers in airport C and the stadium seats in airport A (Fig. 2) being the only exceptions). These served the function of preventing people from lying down, ensuring ‘delayed travellers remain pacified yet vigilant’ (Pascoe, 2001: 208). They also helped to atomise people, placing each within an individual cell – literally in the case of the corrals in airport C. The immovability of these various designs meant that seating doesn’t respond to the flexibility and fluidity of (re)forming groups of people. Airport B contained what looked to be groups of school children on the day we travelled; one group of 10, all in identical shirts, are shown near the centre of figure 3. As long as sufficient seats can be found together (another group in different shirts is more spread out to the right), social ties can be maintained. But the rows militated against whole-group interaction – those at either ends of the rows could not converse, breaking their sociality. Similarly, the stadium-style couches in airport A (Fig. 2) placed people back-to-back with uncomfortably low backrests, with the benches often perpendicular to each other. Furthest away from the camera sits a group of four young men, crushed together so that they can retain their grouping, but disabling easy contact and response. The homogeneity and discomfort of this seating is perhaps designed to drive groups of travellers into cafes and bars which, while providing generally small tables that break up large groups (see café in Fig. 3), offer greater comfort and malleability.

Though the dwelling scripts were looser and more subtle than the materially inscribed flow scripts, they nevertheless contained significant tethers to restrict sociality, spontaneity and response. The coupling constraints of both technology (e.g. FIDs) and material design (e.g. seating) did bring people into proximity, sometimes uncomfortably closely, but worked best for those who could get singularly lost in a book, the individualising experience of shopping, or the isolating joy of their free wifi connection. The effectiveness of this atomisation is illustrated by the fact that, despite spending significant time in the dwell-zones of all three airports during our research, we only experienced one moment of unprompted social interaction. Waiting for our flight to be called in airport B, a young lady struck up a conversation with us on a flimsy pretext. Very quickly her objective became apparent: venting her frustration about the delays and re-routings of the long trip she was currently undertaking. It struck us that sociality is most easily prompted at the airport border by failure; a breakdown in the highly regulated temporality and spatiality of dwelling and flowing. Bissell (2010: 275-6) noted a similar phenomenon with train

passengers: when comforting schedules and routines are ‘brutally scrambled’ by unexpected interruption, a galvanising affect was produced that had the potential to generate responsiveness to ‘communally experienced adversity’. When the airport border functions as intended, however, its atomising script remains intact.

CONCLUSION: ATOMISTIC IMPLICATIONS, THE AIRPORT AND BEYOND

We have argued in this article that the airport border is a problematic ethical space because, despite its claims to prompting cosmopolitan connection, its over-riding logic is one of breaking sociality, producing and privileging an atomised, isolated subject which serves the space’s functional, commercial and securitising aims. Whilst functionality, security and commerce are all crucial to the viability of the airport border, the overwhelming focus upon them is nonetheless an ethical and political choice, not a natural necessity. The material, discursive and affective scripts of flowing and dwelling which help to form passengers as subjects, priming them to act in ways that deflect responsibility and responsiveness, can be imagined otherwise. And this can be done without making the space non-functional, insecure and unable to sell over-priced coffee. In areas of flow, this might include wider spaces, off-set from the traffic, that facilitate mutual assistance with disassembling and assembling oneself before/after security screening. Broader queue mazes could help maintain existing group structures. Instructions before e-gates and screening could encourage attending to others’ difficulties, making the elderly, disabled or unskilled traveller an opportunity for responsiveness and collaboration rather than an irritating block in the flow. Racial profiling, if it can even be deemed necessary or legitimate, could be less stigmatising and isolating than pulling people aside and making them wait in a space of flow. Similarly, areas of dwell could offer more flexible, movable seating options that respond to the forming and reforming of groups. Non-commercial spaces could be created, with entertainments that are more social (musical performances or street theatre, for example) than isolating. Passengers could be trusted to not sleep through their flights, or to approach someone and ask them to give up one of the seats they are lying across, rather than designing seating to rule out the option of lying down. And flight information could not be held back deliberately to tether mobility in a way that prompts anxiety and inattention to those around you. Many more imaginative possibilities are no doubt available and it is not our intention to suggest an ideal form, but merely open the matter to question and challenge.

Our wider concern regarding the way that the atomisation of the airport border undermines responsiveness as the condition of ethics is that these processes may not reach their limit in this recognisably exceptional and functional space. Creating and privileging subjects that consistently deflect rather than embrace responsibility for others could have wider, longer term effects once the space has been negotiated. Furthermore, it is now commonplace in the literature to see airports as ‘microcosms of society’ (Salter, 2008a: 12), both ‘an exception to normal urban spaces and a laboratory for testing wider schemes of social control’ (2008a: 23). Throughout the twentieth century, airports consistently ‘provided a glimpse of how the world outside the terminal might look in 10 years or so’ (Pascoe, 2001: 34). For some, they are the cities of the future (Fuller and Harley, 2005: 48), the archetypes of other global spaces, a ‘de-differentiation’ produced by ‘systems of air travel mov[ing] out and populat[ing] many kinds of place’ (Urry, 2009: 35). Though we are not arguing that the airport border has *caused* wider forms of atomisation in European cities and wider society, as sites of cultural and trajectorial crossing and mixing they could be re-imagined as places that could cultivate rather than discourage responsiveness.

That being said, atomisation is not solely the responsibility of airport designers and managers. As Massey notes, when you are travelling you are not just *crossing* space or travelling *through* it – you are helping to create it because a space is the product of social movements and interactions. Changing your behaviour, the way you cross or move, is also altering the space itself, producing it differently (2005: 117-8). So if we are concerned at the atomisation a particular space encourages, this is not just a situation simply created by those that govern it; the space is equally the responsibility of passengers who contribute to making it what it is. Though discouraging, scripts of flowing and dwelling, seating designs and the placement of technology in the airport do not actually *prevent* responsiveness. It is therefore the way we willingly (if not necessarily happily) participate in our own social alienation that is both a source of concern and resistive opportunity for those examining the ethics of the airport border space and its wider repercussions. Other ways of occupying and creating space are possible – the atomisation of the airport border can never be complete because it remains a nontotalitarian space of freedom as well as constraint.

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